**Prelude-Lorelei Barton**

**Scripture**

This reading comes from chapter 40 of the book of Isaiah. It was written when many of the people of Judah had been taken captive into exile in Babylon. They were feeling crushed, abandoned, and desperate.

Before I read the prophet’s words, locate a place within yourself that feels defeated, lonely, sad, or hopeless. [pause] May these words bring comfort, courage, and hope to you, as they have for our faith ancestors.

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
    says your God.  
**3**A voice cries out:  
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;  
    make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
**4**Every valley shall be lifted up,  
    and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
    and the rough places a plain.  
**5**Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
    and all flesh shall see it together,  
    for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

A voice says, “Cry out!”  
    And I said,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2040&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-18427a)] “What shall I cry?”  
All flesh is grass;  
    their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
**7**The grass withers; the flower fades,  
    [[when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
    surely the people are grass.  
**8**The grass withers; the flower fades,]][[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2040&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-18429b)]  
    but the word of our God will stand forever.  
**9**Get you up to a high mountain,  
    O Zion, herald of good news;[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2040&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-18430c)]  
lift up your voice with strength,  
    O Jerusalem, herald of good news;[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2040&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-18430d)]  
    lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
    “Here is your God!”

Why do you say, O Jacob,  
    and assert, O Israel,  
“My way is hidden from the Lord,  
    and my right is disregarded by my God”?  
**28**Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
    the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
    his understanding is unsearchable.  
**29**He gives power to the faint  
    and strengthens the powerless.  
**30**Even youths will faint and be weary,  
    and the young will fall exhausted,  
**31**but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;  
    they shall mount up with wings like eagles;  
they shall run and not be weary;  
    they shall walk and not faint.

**Poem**

**The Longest Night by Rev. Molly Bolton (copyright: enfleshed, spiritual nourishment for collective liberation)**

They say all is calm and all is bright,  
but our spirits toss and turn and our hearts are not glad.

They say angels echo a joyous strain,  
but our thoughts are looping on what we have lost.

They say a place was made in a manger for a wondrous child,  
but there are empty spaces in our beds, vacant chairs in our workplaces;  
we reach for the phone to call a familiar voice that will not answer.

Our anger points us towards what should not yet be gone.  
Institutions prize profit over people,  
Illness and war break bodies and spirits,  
The last of a species, even now, breathes its final breath.

We rage against systems that are made for death instead of life.

Our grief is love with nowhere to land.  
We go door to door but there is no place for it to stay.  
So we welcome the sun setting early,  
for only the longest night can tend to this sorrow;  
only the bluest hues can meet us in this ache.

The collective grief of the world is too much to comprehend,  
so we speak the names of the ones we know.  
We light candles for all this love we still have burning.

**Kelley**

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the inn.

To be honest, this story we tell each Christmas, at least this part, is not really a happy story. In fact, it’s a story about life in the real world, which we can all agree, is sometimes not very happy. Mary was an unwed, pregnant, young woman, nearly abandoned by her husband to be. Even when he came around, their marriage didn’t get off to an idyllic start. They lived in a country under occupation, with an oppressive ruler. There was no security for them as they made the trek to Bethlehem to register. There was no peace, only the Roman kind of forced peace.

It kind of makes us wonder how, with this story as the backdrop, this season ended up being called, “the most wonderful time of the year.” I wonder, as the couple arrived in Bethlehem, Mary, tired, and sore from the trip, wincing with pain from contractions, I wonder if she would have proclaimed, “This is, indeed, the most wonderful time of the year.” No, I think it is more likely she and Joseph felt scared (this was their first baby) and angry that they had been forced to travel with the birth of the baby imminent.

Maybe they were just barely clinging to the hope the angel’s messages had given them, Mary, “… [Your son] will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. **33**He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21**She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus…”

I wonder if it was hard for Mary and Joseph to imagine, as they looked at their new baby, laying in a feeding trough, that this child they had brought into the world would be reigning over anything. The scene seems a little bit lacking, doesn’t it? Maybe that is why this story is so compelling. As we imagine the way Mary and Joseph felt, we know those feelings, even if we don’t know their specific experience. There are times in life when the loneliness we feel is suffocating, when fear has us in its grips, when our anger has caused us to become someone we don’t recognize in the mirror, and when hopelessness covers us like dense fog.

Maybe that’s where you find yourself right now. And the pressure to be happy, to embrace this “most wonderful time of the year,” makes you feel worse because not only do you feel lousy, but you feel like a failure for not feeling like you are supposed to feel. You’re supposed to be happy for the children or grandchildren, for the holiday parties, but you even getting motivated to put up a tree or hang a wreath on the door is too much.

I am here to tell you, it’s okay to not be okay. Your feelings are real and valid, and you don’t have to stuff them inside to make other people comfortable. If the story of Jesus’ birth teaches us anything at all, it teaches us that ordinary people matter to God. Ordinary people without a lot of money, who get lonely, scared, mad and desperate matter. The story of Jesus’ birth was told and written to give human beings hope that what they were experiencing would not always be. From a Jewish perspective, the hope of a Messiah was not that people would be saved from God, but that they would be saved from the very real oppression, poverty, and hopelessness they were experiencing.

And whether you believe Jesus was the Messiah or not, (certainly in the Jewish tradition he was not), ultimately, we know that all those things the people 2000 years ago needed to be saved from still exist today. Jesus’ life didn’t end suffering, but it did reveal the truth that God is with us in our suffering and in every season of our lives. We are not alone on our best days and our worst. Not only is there no place we can go where God is not, we have been given the gift of other people who, while they have not experienced exactly what we are experiencing, know what it feels like to feel alone, fearful, angry, and unable to access hope. In other words, we all know what it is like to be human.

The Christmas Story isn’t about twinkly lights or making merry.

Christmas is about HOPE.

It is about God saying to each of us, “I know it’s hard. I know you are struggling. You didn’t think life would look anything like this. It won’t always be like this, and wherever life takes you, I am there, even in darkness, perhaps especially in darkness.”

We tend to think of darkness as bad or something to be afraid of, but if it weren’t for darkness, we would miss some of what God created. Without darkness, we wouldn’t see the stars or lightening bugs. Circadian rhythm, essentially the rhythm of life, depends on light and darkness. Even our sacred texts point us to a God who is at home in darkness. Psalm 139 declares, “…even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

I will leave you tonight with this prayer based on that psalm. It was written by Robert Monson.

Please pray with me…

Holy One,

Where can we go that You don’t inhabit?  
Does the dark intimidate you?  
Are You afraid of the dark as we often are?  
Do the shadowy places cause You to take pause and carefully consider  
Whether You will help us, support us, and guide us?

Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, But the night shines as the day;  
The darkness and the light are both alike to you.

We remember that the dark and the light mingle together for You and  
That they are surely terrain that you can cross through.

On the night days, when grief, depression, anxiety weigh us down  
Or the lonely days that pierce our souls  
we pray to the God that creates in the dark  
That moves in the dark  
That can play in the dark  
That can surely find us in the dark places  
At all times knowing, shakily confident at least,  
That You’re listening and willing.

Amen.

**A Liturgy of Light & Remembering**

Just as we light four Advent candles throughout the season, tonight we also light four candles of remembrance. The warmth and light of these candles affirm however we are feeling in this season and in this moment and they remind us of the hope we have in the Holy. We light these candles as a symbol of God’s presence in all places and seasons.

Lighting first candle:

We light the first candle to remember the ones whom we have loved and lost. We pause to remember their names, their faces, the sound of their voices and laughter, the memories and love that bind them to us.

[pause and light first candle.]

You are invited to come forward and light a candle or candles in remembrance of a person or people you have lost. Place the candles on the table as you say their names in your heart.

Let us pray: God, surround those we have loved and lost with your eternal love. Amen.

Lighting the second candle:

We light the second candle to acknowledge the pain of loss; the loss of relationships, the loss of jobs, the loss of health. We pause to gather up the pain of the past and offer it to God, asking to receive the gift of peace.

[pause and light second candle]

You are invited to come forward and light a candle or candles, marking a loss or disappointment in your life, opening your heart to the possibility of something new.

Let us pray. God, refresh, restore and renew us, and lead us into your future. Amen.

Lighting the third candle:

We light the third candle to remember to be gentle with ourselves this season. We pause to remember the times we have felt lousy and gotten out of bed anyway. We remember the times that someone said or did exactly the wrong thing and we offered grace. And we forgive ourselves for the times our anger, sadness, and grief kept us from reflecting your love into the world.

We pause to remember that each one of us is enough. And we are all doing the very best we can in this moment.

[pause and light third candle]

You are invited to come forward and light a candle, acknowledging the light that is still within you and within the ones who surround you.

Let us pray. God, we remember your promise that the light shines in the darkness and is reflected in each of us. Amen.

Lighting the fourth candle:

We light the fourth candle to remember our faith and the gift of hope which the Christmas story offers us. We will call this candle “the Angels’ Candle.” Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and even the shepherds, knew what fear was like. And to each, God’s angelic messengers came with the message, “Do not be afraid.” Angels remind us that God is with us, even through the loss of loved ones, and the frightening and disappointing events of our lives.

We light the fourth candle as a reminder that there is no place where we can be that God’s love cannot reach.

[pause and light fourth candle]

This Christmas season, we remember there are angels all around us, giving us hope and pointing us to the Light, which shines in the darkness and gives us hope for healing and peace.

Let us pray: Holy One, you are light in our darkness. Open our hearts,  
so we are ready for the messengers you send to us and to a world that needs them now more than ever.

Open our ears to the message of the angels, ‘Do not be afraid.’

Give courage and comfort to all who are afraid.

the ones who have been abandoned and forgotten,  
the victims of violence and oppression, poverty and inequity.**:**  
May they hear the angel’s voices saying, ‘Do not be afraid.’

Grow courage in the ones who are afraid to be vulnerable,

To bullies and tyrants, even world leaders,  
To people trying to be big by making others small  
To people grabbing for more because they are afraid they will not have enough.  
To people driven by greed and fear.

May they hear the angel’s voices saying,  
‘Do not be afraid.’

Grow courage in the ones from whom much is expected, upon whose care we are dependent:  
Doctors, nurses and all in our nation’s health services,  
Firefighters and police officers,  
Social workers, teachers and care givers,  
Environmentalists and activists,  
Parents and grandparents.

May they hear the angel’s voices saying,  
‘Do not be afraid.’

Give us courage to look at the world  
with wonder, hope and trust,  
rather than fear, anxiety and worry.

Help us hear the angels’ voices, calling to all who will listen,  
‘Do not be afraid.’ God is here.   
Amen.